

CINEMA

THE WAR YEARS, 1939-1949

JUDAICA

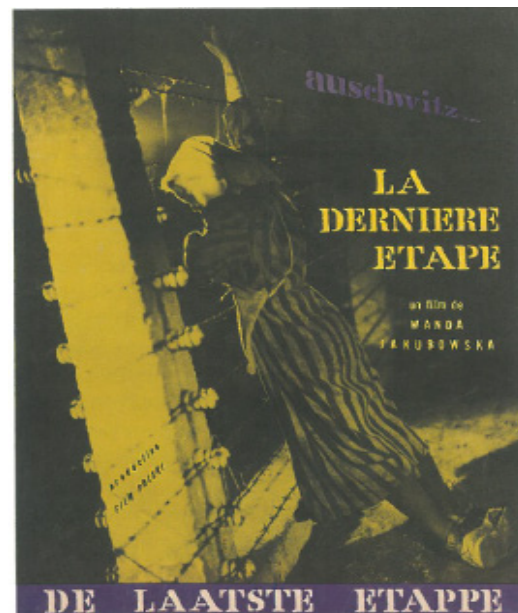
Students Question Students

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American film producers were nervous about tackling the issue of Anti-semitism in their films for several reasons: the divided opinions of the American public, the topic was not easily workable into the most profitable movie genres like romance, musicals, or westerns; and newsreels showing the atrocities of the Holocaust were not available in America until after the War had ended. Therefore the most important films tackling the issue of Anti-semitism came from European filmmakers. Choose a European poster and an American poster to compare/contrast. Discuss the overall design aesthetic and feeling put forth by each and discuss the reasons they might differ based on events happening culturally and geographically on each continent.



The Last Chance (1945)



La Dernier Etape (1947)

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Movies such as *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) and *The Stranger* (1946) are important in the development of American attitudes towards the Holocaust and the war in World War II. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was the first film to portray the Nazi party as a threat to the United States. It was released during the time of the Great Debate—when people were questioning whether the United States should support the Allies against Nazi forces. The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 ended the Great Debate.

Produced in 1946 by International Pictures, *The Stranger* depicts a war-crimes investigator working to capture a Nazi war criminal that escaped to America under a new identity. The film incorporates the traditional Hollywood film trope of a detective thriller with anti-Nazi themes to create a story that follows the detective thriller premise but also comments on World War II and the Holocaust. It is one of the first films post-war to return to a more typical Hollywood genre type. It was the first Hollywood film that presented documentary footage of the concentration camps during the Holocaust. The protagonist uses the footage to show the crimes of the war criminal to others. Depicting the Holocaust was difficult during this time because it was so recent. Americans were also unaware of the tragedies that occurred in camps until after the war and most were heartbroken or horrified by the footage.

Why do you think the director, Orson Welles, chose to include actual footage of concentration camps? In what ways could such inclusion benefit a story?

If you were the director would you include the footage? Why, or why not? What does the return to more typical Hollywood film genres tell you about post-war thoughts and ideas? Why do you think filmmakers returned to the film genres of pre-war Hollywood? Although this poster is not in the exhibition, after looking at the posters on display do you think any lasting effects of the war were left on cinema?

This movie played a role in the perception of the treatment of Jews during World War II. How does this differ from the way information and ideas are transmitted in times of war/crises today? Do movies today affect popular sentiment as much as in the 1940s? What particularly affects public attitudes now?

The Stranger (1946)



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In the history of film, the movie poster has played an important part in gaining the interest of an audience. Characters portrayed on these posters can have an effect on the way movie-goers view a character, or the film itself, before they even see it. In posters for *Sword in the Desert*, Marta Toren is depicted with a gun, which was not expected, especially for a woman of that time. The ironic thing about these posters is that Toren's character does not fire a single shot during the film despite the way she is depicted in the posters.

Why would those who made the posters want to show her in this way if it doesn't truly fit her character? How can these choices affect audience turnout?



Sword in the Desert (1949)



Sword in the Desert (1949)

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The imagery and text seen in these posters often elicit an emotional response from the viewer while also appealing to American patriotism. For example, one poster for the film *Pastor Hall* (an alternate poster is displayed here) features a man with a raised whip, images of officers beating civilians, people in cages, and other disturbing pictures related to Nazi Germany. All of this imagery is accompanied by the line, “It Can Happen Here!”

Additionally, the poster for *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* includes text that reads, “The picture that will open the eyes of 130,000,000 Americans!” and “Over there, they wouldn’t allow you to see this picture. But this, thank Heaven, is America—where pictures like this can be made and seen and cheered—where a swastika can be called a swastika so that all the world may hear!” This text is accompanied by dramatic images of people in distress.

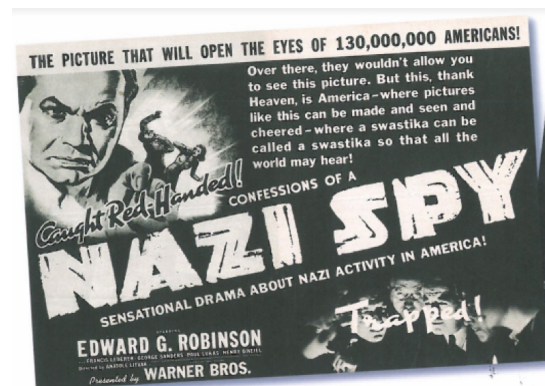
How does the visual and textual content of these posters imply an inherent link between American patriotism and goodness/morality?

How does the content of these posters embody the struggle between freedom and oppression? What do you feel is the goal of these posters, aside from making people want to see the movie?

Would you call these posters nationalistic? Why or why not? Do you think there is a difference between nationalism and patriotism? If so, how would you define that difference?



Pastor Hill (1940)



Confessions of a Nazi Spy (1939)

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The movie *Sergeant York* was the highest grossing film of 1941. It was the most successful of the so-called “platoon films” designed to engage Americans in the war effort. What other posters serve to represent this same theme? How does this poster (similar but alternate poster shown here) compare and contrast to posters of today’s war films including *American Sniper*?

What do these posters reveal about being a soldier in America? How did they help engage Americans in the war effort?



American Sniper (2015)



Sergeant York (1941)

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In the poster for the film *Crossfire* (pictured below but not in the exhibition), the characters are presented in traditional noir archetypes of the “cold blooded killer,” the “femme fatale,” and the “helpless victim.” These archetypes were familiar to Americans from various other noir films; the inclusion of a Jewish character being murdered was a way to bring the discrimination of Jews to the American consciousness. With this in mind, compare and contrast the *Crossfire* poster to either the poster for *Gentlemen's Agreement* or *The Mortal Storm* and discuss the way the characters are represented differently and the way this might affect the perception of the storyline and the reception of the film by the general public.

Gentleman's Agreement (1947)



Crossfire (1947)



The Mortal Storm (1940)

